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LCWR on accusations: 'Communication has broken down'; 'mistrust has developed'

Thomas C. Fox | May. 8, 2014
LCWR-CDF 2014

A U.S. women religious leadership group expressed regret today that two years of private meetings with the Vatican doctrinal congregation have not borne fruit and have "broken down" and, as a result, "mistrust has developed."

But the leaders also rededicated their organization to continued dialogue with Vatican officials, saying, "The continuation of such conversation may be one of the most critical endeavors we, as leaders, can pursue for the sake of the world, the Church, and religious life."

"In our meetings at the [Congregations for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF)], [the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)] was saddened to learn that impressions of the organization in the past decades have become institutionalized in the Vatican, and these institutionalized perceptions have led to judgments and ultimately to the doctrinal assessment," the LCWR leaders said in a statement released Thursday [1].

"During the meeting it became evident that despite maximum efforts through the years, communication has broken down and as a result, mistrust has developed. What created an opening toward dialogue in this meeting was hearing first-hand the way the CDF perceives LCWR. We do not recognize ourselves in the doctrinal assessment of the conference and realize that, despite that fact, our attempts to clarify misperceptions have led to deeper misunderstandings."

LCWR has been under a cloak of doctrinal congregation suspicion since 2009, when the Vatican congregation said it was looking into unresolved issues dating back to 2001. In 2012, the doctrinal congregation, having completed its doctrinal assessment, issued a reform mandate. Two years of further discussions set the scene for the LCWR leadership visit to Rome and its meeting at the CDF April 30.

Thursday's LCWR statement, meanwhile, said the women were heartened by the attempt by all parties "to find a way through that honors the integrity and mission of both offices."

"What created an opening toward dialogue in this meeting was hearing first-hand the way the CDF perceives LCWR," the statement reads. "We do not recognize ourselves in the doctrinal assessment of the conference and realize that, despite that fact, our attempts to clarify misperceptions have led to deeper misunderstandings."

The women's group affirmed that recent public statements by CDF head Cardinal Gerhard Müller and Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, the CDF delegate overseeing the implementation of the reform mandate, had been accurate.

"For LCWR, this conversation was constructive in its frankness and lack of ambiguity. It was not an easy discussion, but its openness and spirit of inquiry created a space for authentic dialogue and discernment."

The LCWR statement said the CDF meeting must be viewed within the context of LCWR's entire visit to Vatican dicasteries, or departments.

"In our first visit on April 27 to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Monsignor Paul Tigue, Secretary, shared that Pope Francis insists upon creating, as part of the New Evangelization, a culture of encounter, marked by dialogue and discernment. We experienced this culture of encounter in every Vatican office we visited in the Curia, an encounter marked by genuine interaction and mutual respect."

The women said they plan to continue discussions with the doctrinal congregation.

"Passion for all that the Church can be deepens our commitment to stay at the table and talk through differences," the statement said.

"In some ways, for LCWR, nothing has changed. We are still under the mandate and still tasked with the difficult work of exploring the meaning and application of key theological, spiritual, social, moral, and ethical concepts together as a conference and in dialogue with the Vatican officials. This work is fraught with tension and misunderstanding. Yet, this is the work of leaders in all walks of life in these times of massive change in the world."

The women's statement came more than a week after the CDF meeting. LCWR said it was necessary to review the situation with its top leadership before issuing a statement.

The depth of the rift between CDF and LCWR became public early this week [3], when Müller's opening remarks to the women at their April 30 meeting appeared on the Vatican website [4].

Müller accused LCWR of bad faith and of not abiding by a reform agenda the Vatican imposed in 2012 as part of its doctrinal assessment.

In his remarks, he also criticized the group for having ignored procedures for choosing speakers for their annual conferences and questioned if their programs were promoting heresy.

The April 30 meeting at the Vatican included the LCWR leadership -- St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn, Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sharon Holland, and St. Joseph Sr. Janet Mock, LCWR executive director -- Müller and officials of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Sartain.

LCWR is an umbrella organization representing more than 90 percent of the nation's Catholic women religious congregations.

When the doctrinal assessment began in 2009, the doctrinal congregation said it had become necessary because of three unresolved issues that surfaced at a 2001 meeting between LCWR and the doctrinal congregation in Rome: the ordination of women, the theology of religious pluralism, and homosexuality. (More: Timeline of interactions between LCWR, doctrinal congregation [5])

The full text of the LCWR statement follows:

> Over the past several days, there has been much public commentary on the opening remarks of

Cardinal Gerhard Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Presidency of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) at their annual meeting April 30, 2014. In a public statement after the promulgation of the Cardinal's beginning remarks, in separate releases, both Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, archbishop delegate overseeing the implementation of the CDF mandate, and the LCWR Presidency affirmed the accuracy of the Cardinal's remarks and commented on the positive conversation that followed. For LCWR, this conversation was constructive in its frankness and lack of ambiguity. It was not an easy discussion, but its openness and spirit of inquiry created a space for authentic dialogue and discernment.

The meeting with CDF must be viewed within the context of LCWR's entire visit to Vatican dicasteries. In our first visit on April 27 to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Monsignor Paul Tigue, Secretary, shared that Pope Francis insists upon creating, as part of the New Evangelization, a culture of encounter, marked by dialogue and discernment. We experienced this culture of encounter in every Vatican office we visited in the Curia, an encounter marked by genuine interaction and mutual respect.

We also experienced the Church Universal as we learned about the many international meetings the Holy Father has convened and is planning to convene, addressing global issues like the economy, environment, family life, hunger, poverty, water, violence, trafficking, and the desire to engage all people -- the young, the old, the rich, the poor in communion, working together for the common good of the planet. We felt the energy flowing from these initiatives which are not new for the Vatican but have a renewed sense of urgency and possibility.

In our meetings at CDF, LCWR was saddened to learn that impressions of the organization in the past decades have become institutionalized in the Vatican, and these institutionalized perceptions have led to judgments and ultimately to the doctrinal assessment. During the meeting it became evident that despite maximum efforts through the years, communication has broken down and as a result, mistrust has developed. What created an opening toward dialogue in this meeting was hearing first-hand the way the CDF perceives LCWR. We do not recognize ourselves in the doctrinal assessment of the conference and realize that, despite that fact, our attempts to clarify misperceptions have led to deeper misunderstandings. This is a very complex matter, yet LCWR was heartened by the attempt of both CDF and LCWR to find a way through that honors the integrity and mission of both offices.

Passion for all that the Church can be deepens our commitment to stay at the table and talk through differences. We want to be part of the universal Church rooted in the Gospel, a Church that hears the cry of the poor and is united in its response. At the same time, we cannot call for peace-making in Syria, the Middle East, in South Sudan, unless we too sit at tables with people who hold varying views and work patiently and consistently for a genuine meeting of minds and hearts.

In some ways, for LCWR, nothing has changed. We are still under the mandate and still tasked with the difficult work of exploring the meaning and application of key theological, spiritual, social, moral, and ethical concepts together as a conference and in dialogue with the Vatican officials. This work is fraught with tension and misunderstanding. Yet, this is the work of leaders in all walks of life in these times of massive change in the world.

> At our meeting with the CDF officials, we experienced a movement toward honest and authentic conversation on some of the matters that lie at the heart of our faith and our vocation. We have come to believe that the continuation of such conversation may be one of the most critical endeavors we, as leaders, can pursue for the sake of the world, the Church, and religious life.

[Tom Fox is *NCR* publisher and director of *NCR*'s Global Sisters Report [6]. Follow him on Twitter: @NCRTomFox [7].]

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